

Spring 2013 Newsletter



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Dear Air Force Families,

Welcome to your Spring 2013 newsletter. We are emerging from the introspection of winter, and waking up to the stirring of spring. Every season has its cycle, just like us, and we hope this time brings hope and a fresh perspective to your lives. As always, we hope and pray that you have found comfort and support through your Air Force Family Support Network as you continue your healing journey.

This issue is particularly meaningful for us because it contains lots of contributions from this group. We realize it is not easy to open up and share personal reflections regarding a loved one who is no longer with us, so we especially appreciate those of you who had the courage and took the time to do so ~ thank you. To all members of this network, thank you for being a part of this family; we know that without you, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers would not have been able to serve this great country of ours as American Airmen, as well as they did.

On that note, we want to especially honor our mothers as Mother's Day approaches. Without you, your babies could not have existed as the precious individuals they were while they were with us. God grace our mothers... We also have a special Memorial Day tribute to mark this sanctified observance, and will share stories of how family members have managed to "move on with life." And finally, you will find our special Angelversary section that honors your loved ones when they became angels. ~ Thank you and have a blessed spring.

Air Force Families Forever

"Ensuring that the families of our fallen Airmen are never forgotten by providing immediate and long-term compassionate support."

Please know that we are not attempting to endorse any company, service or product, nor are we attempting to impose any beliefs on you. We are simply giving you options to explore as you desire.



Being the Mother of a Child Who Died – On Mother's Day

By Claire McCarthy, M.D.

I am the mother of a child who died. And that makes Mother's Day very hard.

Recently I was talking to a mother whose child had just died. "What about Mother's Day?" she asked, through tears. It was hard to know what to say, because it's a terrible day for those of us who have lost a child. Other days of the year you can maybe make it a few hours without thinking about your loss; other days of the year you can pretend that you are an ordinary person and that life is normal. But not on Mother's Day.

On Mother's Day it's in your face that your child is gone forever. On Mother's Day you can't pretend you are ordinary or that life is normal. All the hoopla, all the Hallmark hype, the handmade cards and flowers and family gatherings, make it almost excruciating.

Our town has a Mother's Day road race for which I am eternally grateful – especially because, in a demonstration of grace's existence, the start and finish are next to the cemetery where my son is buried. On my way I can visit his grave and say what I need to say and look yet again at the name we chose for him carved into stone. At the end of the race, they give all the mothers a flower; on my way home, I go back to the grave and lay my flower there. And then I move forward with the day.

See, that's the real challenge after losing a child: moving forward. It's almost impossible to envision in that moment of loss; how can life continue after something so horrible? But life does continue, whether we like it or not. There are chores to do and bills to pay; morning comes, again and again. So you pick yourself up and you live, but you are never the same.

At first, we are different because of our raw sadness. But over time, the sadness moves from our skin into our bones. It becomes less visible, but no less who we are.



It changes into a wisdom, one we'd give up in a heartbeat to have our child back. We who have lost children understand life's fragility and beauty. We who have lost children understand that so many things just aren't important. All that is important is those we love. All that is important is each other. Nothing else.

It can feel very lonely, being the parent of a child who died. Especially on Mother's Day or Father's Day. We feel so different from those around us, all those happy people with children the same age as ours was, or would have been. But over the years, I have come to understand that I'm not alone at all.

There is a wonderful Buddhist story about a woman whose son gets sick and dies. She goes to the Buddha to ask him to bring her son back to life; I will, he says, if you bring me some mustard seeds from the home of a family that has not known loss. She goes from house to house but can find no family that has not lost someone dear to them. She buries her son and goes to the Buddha and says: I understand now.

That is what I understand now. It doesn't make me miss my son any less, or Mother's Day any easier. But it helps me make sense of it; loss is a part of life. There are no guarantees, ever. Our children, and all those we love, are gifts to us from however long we have them.

Follow Claire McCarthy, M.D. on Twitter:
www.twitter.com/@drClaire

Mothers share their journey...

"Mother's Day 2009 was the last time I saw my beautiful Jessica. She, my sister and I took a picture that day."



~ Sharon Kidd, Mother of Jessica Tarver

Mothers make days happy ~
Happy Mother's Day

"After my son died and all of his belongings were shipped to me I couldn't bear the thought of going through everything it was just too painful. My therapist encouraged me to go through one box at a time and look for something that I could wear of his on a daily basis if I wanted to. In an envelope in one of the boxes were four sets of his dog tags. A dear friend of mine who has her own beading company designed a bracelet for me. Her website is www.fatkatbeads.com. She has a picture of it posted and it is just amazing. There may be someone else out there that might want to make something of their loved one into something they can wear always."

~Deb Cullen, Mother of Geoffry Cullen, Jr.

For more information about
Tags Of Honor, email or go to:
info@tagofhonor.com
www.tagofhonor.com



MOTHERS SHARE THEIR JOURNEY...

A Thank You Letter to my Son, By Judy Gentz

Dear Joel,

I want to thank you for calling me on Mother's Day. It was so awesome to hear your voice... I felt a little tongue tied because I was so surprised it was you. Thanks for your persistence in calling back 3 times when the satellite phone kept disconnecting. I really felt special when you did that!

If I had known that would be the last time I'd hear your voice, or talk to you, I would have said so much more. I am so glad I got to say "I love you" again. One month later you were gone from this world. I know you know that we love and miss you... I just wish I could have given you another hug and kiss... and one more I love you.

Thank you for being you, for being such a great son and brother and husband. Thank you for saving the lives of others while you were deployed as a Combat Rescue Officer. Thank you for letting me know you are "fine." Thank you for waiting for me. I love you sweetheart. Not a day goes by that I don't thank God you are my son.

Love you, Mom

Judy Gentz

GSM of Capt Joel Gentz, USAF

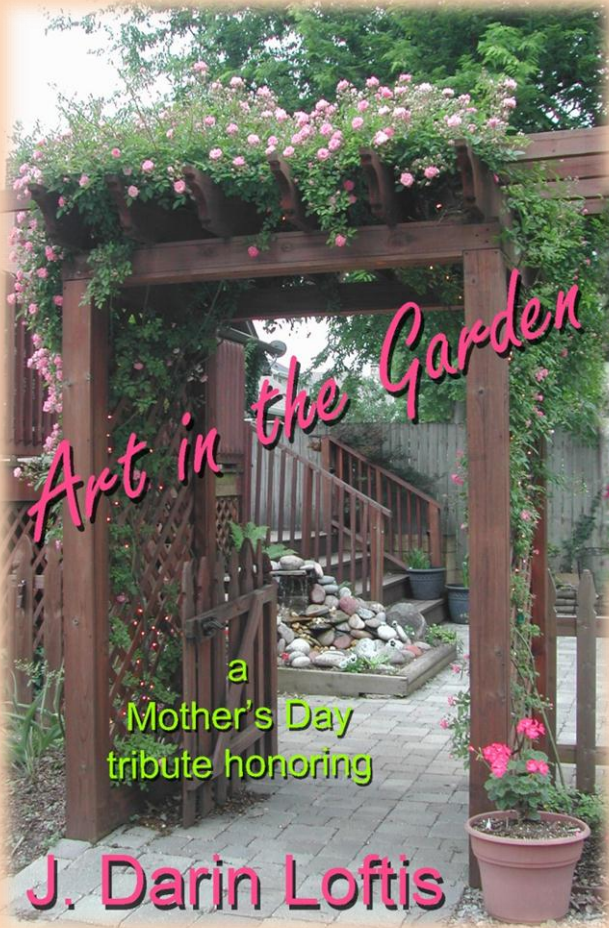
KIA: 9 June 2010



Mothers share their journey...

By Chris Janne, Mother of J. Darin Loftis

"This will be my second Mother's Day without my son. This year, to celebrate the gift of Darin's life, I am hosting an art exhibit in my garden. In addition to an exhibit of local artists, there will also be a silent auction and donation opportunities benefiting a scholarship established by his high school class. The scholarship honors his mission of education. One of his classmates, an artist and art teacher, is planning a tribute in remembrance of Darin's service to our country."



Continuing Darin's mission of education is my way of coping with his death. I think making something positive of this tragedy is what he would want. You can find more information on the Art in the Garden event at:

www.artinthegardenmotherstribute.blogspot.com

and on the scholarship at:

www.jdarinloftisscholarship.blogspot.com

Mothers share their journey...

“Where am I now?”

By Sandra Moore

Mother of SrA Emory Corwine, USAF



Today is the first day of spring and 9 months and 5 days since I lost my beautiful son SrA Emory Corwine. Where am I now?

I'm still here. I am a mother, a wife, a daughter, a sister, a friend, a co-worker. I'm still working, still checking homework, and driving children to activities, still wiping their tears away, still having friends over for dinner, still hiking the hill with a dear friend because we both need the exercise. Mostly, I'm still here trying to make some sense of this unfathomable loss and trying to figure out how I can ever make things right for my family.

The truth, I know, is that I can't. As active and involved as I try to be, the truth is I spend the vast majority of my free time sitting looking at photographs, wondering around the house and back hill searching.... he is everywhere, yet nowhere... and I hate it!

Emory was passionate and full of life. He believed in “giving back”, he wasted few moments in his 24 years and 358 days. He was the best of the best. He deserved more time. I could go on and on and on...

Despair would disgrace his memory and so we do not despair but rather we, as a family, celebrate his life, or at least we try.

All but a handful of Emory's ashes were buried with his brother's beneath the shade of a great pine where the sun rises over the wooded hillside in a small local cemetery. Throughout the winter we have maintained bird feeders (one of which his youngest sister made for him this Christmas) under his great tree. We think he would appreciate the life flying around his resting place and the song in the air. At sunrise on Christmas we built him a small fire at the site (SERE forever) and read, as is our tradition, of the birth of Christ. You can get away with these things in a small town. This spring we will place a large sculptural monument and a bench that Emory's dad designed and we'll plant a butterfly garden at the site. The seed feeders will be replaced with hummingbird feeders for the summer.

As for that handful of ashes; we sent some to Washington with his 19yr old sister for a memorial “Ash” dive (he loved to jump out of perfectly good airplanes). His spirit soars! We took some to NOLA where we participated in a “memorial build” that his AmeriCorps, NCCC team had arranged. It was very uplifting to do good work in a city that he loved with some wonderful folks who we had never met, but who indeed loved our son. We still hold some precious ash.

We have established memorial Volunteer Service award in Emory's name to be given to a local senior as well as and annual tuition scholarship for a student at the martial arts school where he received his black belt. On May 11 the Andover Class of 2005 will launch the 1st Annual 5K Memorial Run for their beloved friend. They plan to use the proceeds to fuel a Character Award to be given to a graduating senior and to also donate to a wilderness training school that Emory attended.

And so, we live on as fate has determined we must, and we will honor his life. I was blessed to have had him for 24 years and 358 days.

Mothers share their journey...

"Oh, the Places You'll Go"

By *Dr. Patricia O'Kane-Trombley*

Gold Star Mother of

Captain Thomas Joseph O'Kane Gramith



My son, Captain Thomas Joseph O'Kane Gramith, was an extraordinary young man. He was: kind, considerate, deliberate, compassionate, a man of integrity and dedicated to serving his Country and his family.

I had the honor of being his mother. I taught him to dream, I taught him to believe that he could take those dreams and that he could accomplish anything. In his 27 years he certainly did just that.

Eagles were a pervasive theme in Tom's life. Starting at a young age, he drew eagles. Often, they would show up in his newest designs or drawings, sometimes on school papers. Eagles are native to Minnesota. When Thomas was little, I used to lead him in pretending that he was an eagle. We continued this game for years. His eagle arms continued to lengthen until his wingspan was 74 inches and we would use the term wingspan! I would say that someday you will fly like an eagle. Tom would be the big brother looking out for everyone.

Not everyone was convinced! Thomas didn't like reading, preferred to draw creatively and stare at the sky. Often he would say to me, "Mom, do you see that elephant over there?" How about that giraffe? And sure enough, there it was right where Thomas was pointing. At times this tendency challenged the patience of teachers and baseball coaches. He saw patterns everywhere – so much so that as a young child I thought he would be a graphic artist.

During his 7th grade year Thomas began to hone his espionage skills. Because of Tom's expertise at camouflaging his true talents from several teachers many teachers thought he wasn't interested in a career- much less college. He carefully kept it under the radar screen hidden away between his older sister Katie's A's and his younger brother's Patrick's A's and his younger sister Liesl's A's.

Tom originally thought he wanted to be an Army officer. He graduated from St. Thomas Academy a decorated Army Jr ROTC High school in St. Paul, Minnesota. But what Tom really wanted to do was fly. At North Dakota State University he majored in Mechanical Engineering and was an integral part of Air Force ROTC-Detachment 610- the Eagle Wing.

And the Eagle began to soar and turned on the afterburners. The first semester at North Dakota State University he completely created a new web site for his Air Force Detachment. In his freshman year he also initiated the Air Force bringing in the colors at home football games and even for the solemn remembrance of 9/11.

As the Wing Commander his senior year, he had a plan with the other Colonel to make communications between each division -much better than they ever had been. And they did. Just ⁷

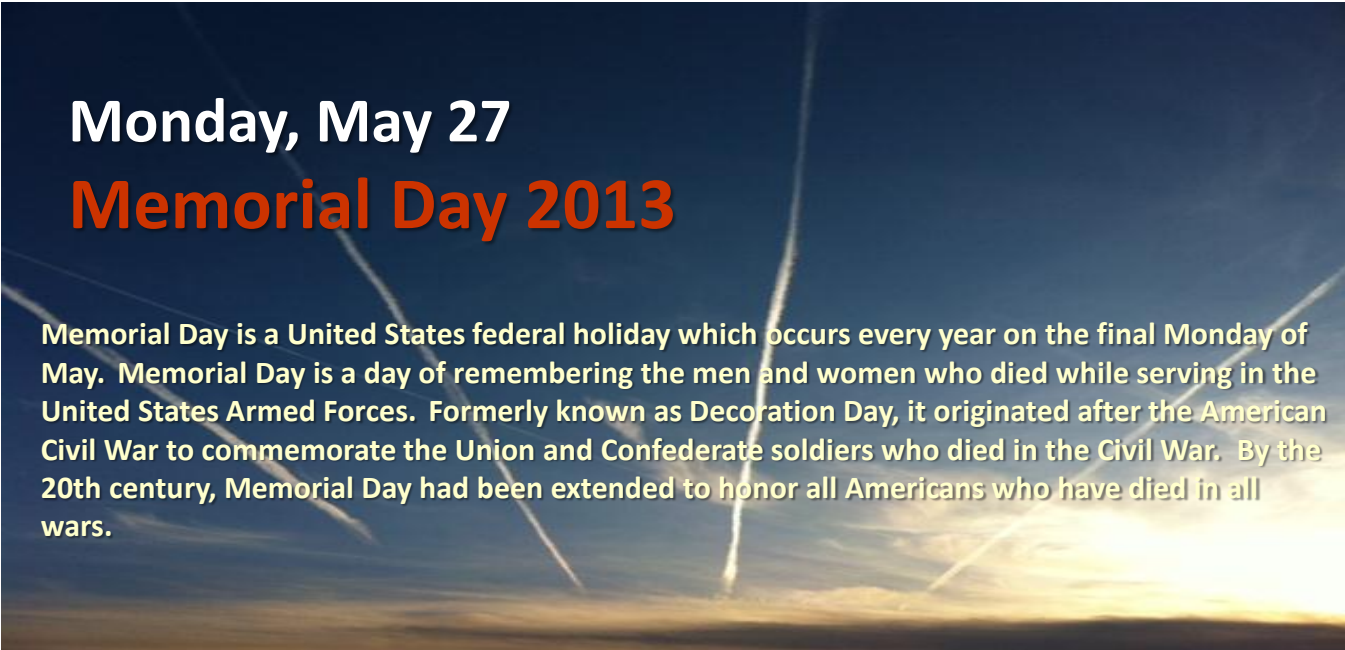
after the commissioning ceremony was over, Colonel Keating and Major Stealey took me aside and told me that Tom's career could go as far as the Stars it was up to Tom. I rolled my eyes thinking it was just a kind platitude. They read my thoughts.....,"no we mean it Mom, Tom can go as far as the Stars, if he wants it."

Just before Tom graduated from college he told me he had been selected to be a Strike Fighter. I had no idea what that meant but I remember shaking inside. Tom's first duty station would be at Pensacola Air Station where all the Strike Fighters are trained. I later found out that Tom was one of only two ROTC cadets chosen from across the nation! After two years he had his choice: he could either fly the B-1B or the F-15E. Tom chose the Eagle. He would use his engineering skills as the Weapon Systems Officer and he would pilot the plane as Commander. Tom was thrilled flying the F-15E. He was part of the famous 336th Squadron of World War II fame. And he was flying with Mark McDowell who was just like his brother Patrick. He told me it couldn't get better than that.

If you see me in Peregrine, I usually have on a small gold pin. It designates that I am a Gold Star Mother. On July 18, 2009 Tom's Eagle with Tom and his co-pilot Mark McDowell crashed into the unforgiving Ghazni, Afghanistan ground. The War on Terror- in Afghanistan- and around the world is a real war and some of us give every day to our beloved country. I live every day without my beloved son, Tom.

Treasure this beloved country. Tom would want you to do just that.





Monday, May 27

Memorial Day 2013

Memorial Day is a United States federal holiday which occurs every year on the final Monday of May. Memorial Day is a day of remembering the men and women who died while serving in the United States Armed Forces. Formerly known as Decoration Day, it originated after the American Civil War to commemorate the Union and Confederate soldiers who died in the Civil War. By the 20th century, Memorial Day had been extended to honor all Americans who have died in all wars.

By Dan Hughes

Father of SrA John M. Hughes, USAF

My Dad was an Airman before I was born. He always regretted leaving the Air Force. He died 3 years before our son John joined the Air Force. I always told John that his grandfather would have been very proud of his decision to join the Air Force. I know my Dad would have given anything to return to Lackland to see John graduate from basic training.

After my Dad died, Memorial Day really change from a day of cookouts, swimming, and fun; to a day of reflection. The cemetery where my Dad is buried has 1000's of veteran buried there. It takes an army of volunteers all week to prepare. They place a flag on the grave of each veteran, and the entrance is lined with flags and plaques of recently deceased veterans. There is a very dignified ceremony, by the members of the VFW, with a reading of the names of all new veterans buried there in the last year, followed by the amazing grace played on bag pipes, a 21 gun salute and the playing of Taps. Not a dry eye is in attendance.

While I was moved and very proud of my Dad being honored, I never expected my son John to be so honored in my life time. Well, last year that changed. My wife and I went as we have since my Dad died along with my Mom and many other family members. We did not expect to be so affected as we were. I guess we were naïve as we prepared to attend what is now an annual trek to pay our respects and reflect on the price paid for our liberties. I think because this was the first year after John's death, it was a far more somber day then ever before.

Normally after the service we would go with the rest of my family to a late breakfast and then to have a pool party and cookout. But not this time. We found ourselves emotionally and physically drained. My wife and I spent most of the day quietly together, until late afternoon. My wife's sister and family came over and slowly began to pull us up. By the end of the evening we were able to laugh and enjoy family together.

As I prepare for this year, I know that the morning at the service will again have a strong emotional impact. I know that I will once again struggle with the mixed emotions of sad loss of my Dad and son. While having incredible pride for their selfless act of putting on the uniform and willingness to fight under our wonderful colors. I will face this day with a swelling of pride in my heart, knowing that two men so dear to me share a common bond through all time. I know now that I will need to be around family and friends who love us and have become rocks we can lean upon. I will reflect on the day but will also take time to smile, laugh and yes enjoy a family cookout.



The Hughes Family

**The family with FLO
MSgt Johnson**



***"Our FLO's help was
wonderful during our
time of grief."***



SrA John M. Hughes

**John and dad at Browns
game 2011**



**Maj Minch presenting
Meritorious Service
Award**



Commemorating Memorial Day

My son, Joseph, died shortly before Memorial Day. In fact I arrived home from Dover from the Dignified Transfer Ceremony on Memorial Day to phone calls from the media. Last year, the first anniversary of his death, our family kept things simple. My other 3 children and their families came home for the weekend to enjoy time together. The grandkids kept things lively! On Sunday we went out to the cemetery and placed a memorial at my son's grave. My then 3 year old grandson wanted to know why we were there so he and I sat down, read Joseph's headstone, and talked about it being a place for Grandma and the rest of the family to remember Uncle Joseph.

This year, we are doing much bigger things. My son-in-law is a runner and triathlete and has decided to organize a 5K run/walk in town in memory of Joseph and to raise funds for the 2 charities named as a memorial for Joseph at the time of his death. We aren't sure how many people to expect, but it is an exciting adventure and should be a great way for us, and the community, to remember our family's hero and raise money for two worthy causes; Fisher House and EOD Warrior Foundation. With any luck "Jog 4 Joe" will become an annual event in Ottumwa, IA.

Mary Ellen Winston
Mother of SSgt Joseph J. Hamski, USAF
KIA May 26, 2011

JOG 4 JOE

JOG 4 JOE
HONORING SSGT JOSEPH J. HAMSKI
5K RUN, WALK, RUCK, OR CRAWL

MAY 27, 2013

Packet Pick-Up: 7:30 AM
Race Start: 9:00 AM
OTTUMWA PARK

18 & Under - \$10
19 & Over - \$20
After May 3 and Race Day - \$25/\$15

Register at (Active.com):
http://www.active.com/event_detail.cfm?event_id=2083551

Honoring
SSGT Joseph J. Hamski
KIA May 26, 2011
Kandahar, Afghanistan

All Proceeds from Jog 4 Joe will be donated to the following charities:

EOD WARRIOR FOUNDATION
FISHER HOUSE
HELPING MILITARY FAMILIES

For More Information, Contact
jog4joe5k@gmail.com
www.facebook.OttumwaJog4Joe

Commemorating Memorial Day

In January a radio station in Qalat, Afghanistan was dedicated in honor and memory of Darin's part in getting the station upgraded and expanded. On February 25, the first anniversary of his death, *Loftis Auditorium* at Hurlburt Field was dedicated in his memory. It is an auditorium where Darin taught when not on deployment. You can get more information on these tributes at: <http://www.afsoc.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123338304>

~ Chris Janne, Mother of Lt Col J. Darin Loftis, USAF

"On Memorial Day Jessica was honored as a Fallen Hero at my church by an active duty Sergeant Major."

~ Sharon Kjidd, Mother of SrA Jessica Tarver, USAF

"The first spring after my son Jamie was called Home, I remember on Memorial Day designating a small area of my yard to him and started a small garden. The following year I added to it as well, my family did too. My little nieces painted rocks, my sister planted a butter fly bush, and for this year I bought a little stand with a plaque on it with his name and a Bible verse.

I still remember my son calling the first Memorial Day when he was in Texas training, telling me how much more this date meant to him and how we all needed to give praise to all that have sacrificed themselves for this country. I realized during that phone call that my beautiful boy turned into a man. This garden brings me much peace... I spend many moments there tending the flowers and knowing my son is with me..."

~ Rose Burroughs, Mother of Amn Jamie Burroughs, USAF

ANGELVERSARIES

"WHEN OUR LOVED ONES BECAME ANGELS"

Marianne: *The Hall family and fiancé Marianne, along with other family members of the "Ratchet 33 Crew" Airmen stationed at Hurlburt Field, attended a memorial for the four crew members on Feb. 18, 2013 to commemorate the one-year Angelversary. In memory of Capt Ryan Hall, R.I.P. 2/18/12*

Sharon: *"On Jessica's Angelversary, I didn't do anything per se, but now I will. On her birthday I would go to Pensacola to the grave site and release balloons, the number of how old she would have turned, and if anyone on my Facebook page, family or friends were interested in participating and couldn't get to Pensacola they could release one balloon where ever they are. Now I will release balloons on her Angelversary. This year I will release 4 balloons on June 1st for four years." In memory of SrA Jessica Tarver, R.I.P. 6/1/09*

Chrissy: *"Angelversaries are marked with many tears, disbelief that another year has passed, treasured memories, a visit to the cemetery with flowers and a heart-felt chat with Ryan. November 18, 2009 is a date that I can feel coming without looking at the calendar." In memory of SrA Ryan Matthews, R.I.P. 11/18/09*

Linda: *"For Phil's Angelversary last year, and the upcoming one on 27 April, I honor all nine who lost their lives that day. I celebrate life so that the assassin doesn't get me too. I run a marathon and release pink/purple polka dotted balloons. This year, it will be at the Boston Marathon. They invited me to run (I have qualified, but not this year) to honor the military family that has carried me every step of this journey. I run for all of us--I will be the girl with the American flag, a picture of her soldier, and a polka dotted balloon. I run on...and on." In memory of Maj Phillip Ambard, R.I.P. 4/27/11*

*A special "thanks" to Ryan's Marianne
for suggesting this section!*



ANGELVERSARIES

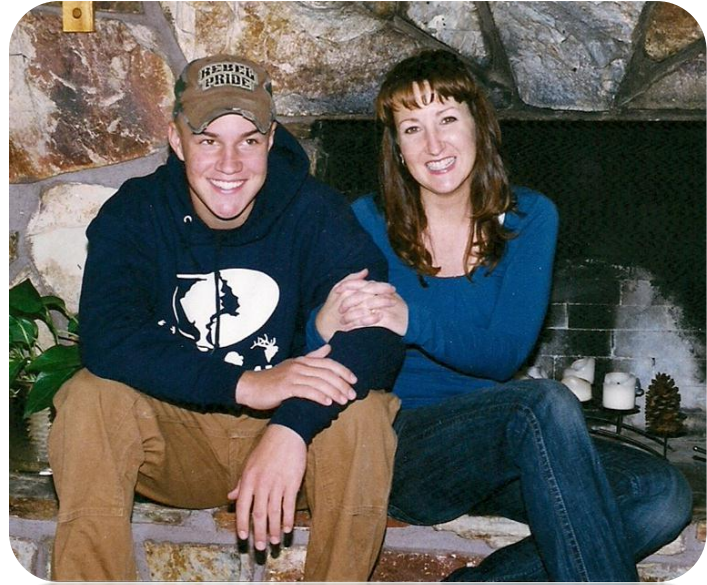
Emily: "On Jimmy's first Angelversary, we had a BBQ. We invited all Jimmy's and our friends. We also invited all the Patriot Guard Riders that have become family to us. I asked everyone to bring 2 candles, one for Jimmy and one for all the fallen heroes. I had a table out for all the candles in the yard. We sat by the fire and told stories about Jimmy. His friend held nothing back..... LOL . We had many "Jack" toasts to Jimmy. As the night went on, someone always was at the candle table keeping them all lit. At the candle table quite words and prayers were said. I wanted it to be a celebration of Jimmy's life. The last person left at 2 am. When I went out in the morning most of the candles were still lit."

~ In memory of James Hansen, R.I.P. 9/15/10



How we Move On with Life...

Life continues to move even when I don't want it to so I make myself put one foot in front of the other and continue to remind myself that God doesn't make mistakes. I hold on to my faith with both hands. My counselor helps me work through the really dark times. I am close with my immediate family and treasure every moment I have with my youngest son. After losing Ryan, life isn't the same, time isn't measured the same. I'm learning to live what might be described as a "normal life"/"normal routine" but Ryan is always with me. I have more good days than bad now and I'm grateful for that. I don't want to feel that kind of pain again so I try and think of things that keep me moving forward. Moving on with life is more complex than I can fully describe....



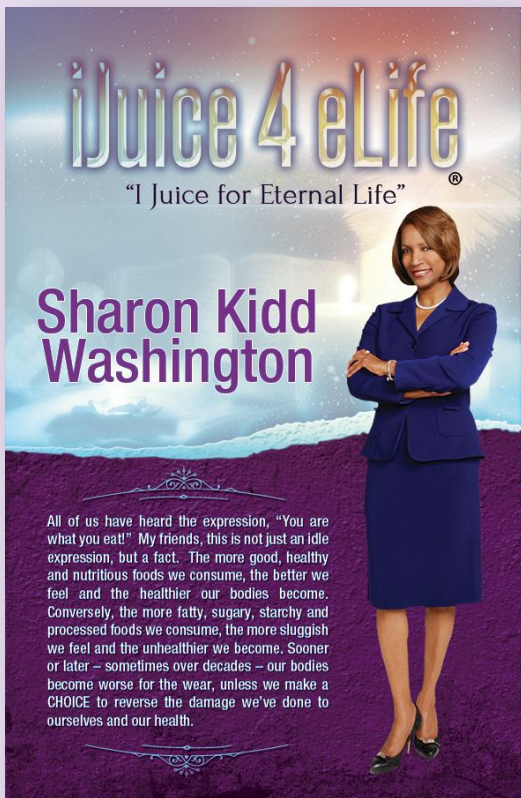
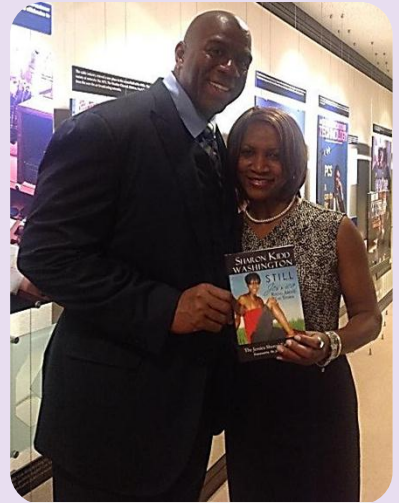
~ Chrissy Matthews, Mother of SrA Ryan Matthews, USAF

For me it's been hard to move on. It's was two years in January that I lost my son Jamie. I try to push myself to do the things I enjoy but it's hard. If I do choose to participate I do so in small doses. If I need to, I leave. I've learned that pushing myself too much is no good either. But I have to admit that lately I find myself wanting to do things again. I've started projects, attended a few concerts, taking an on line class, etc. About two weeks ago I went out with my other two children and their friends to celebrate an acquaintance's birthday. My children are all close in age and were best of friends and they shared friends. It was so good to be with all these kids... kids who over their teen and college years grew up in my house. We laughed and I truly had a wonderful time. And I've been trying so hard to do things with my two children when they ask me because I don't want to have any regrets... when I woke up the next day I remember thinking about the night before and I realized I didn't cry last night... I wasn't sad... I didn't focus my thoughts on Jamie... it was the first time. I started crying and kept telling Jamie I didn't forget you. The guilt was horrible. I sat down and prayed on this and I could see Jamie's face smiling from ear to ear... proud that I enjoyed myself... happy that I had fun. He was always so carefree and enjoyed life to the fullest. I realized how much he would love too see me happy again. I believe things will turn around for me soon. When I find things tough, I close my eyes and imagine him taking me by the hand smiling with his big blue eyes and saying, "Come on mamma, it's okay, you can do this, I want you to do this..." I know I'll never forget.....

~ Rose Burroughs, Mother of Amn Jamie Burroughs, USAF

How we Move On with Life...

"I am now the CEO of Life In His Presence Ministries, LLC , specializing in Spiritual, Marital (after divorce) and Grief Counseling. I Juice For Eternal Life with iJuice 4 eLife, and am hoping to one day start The Jessica Sheree' Tarver STILL'S Disease Foundation (bringing awareness to STILL'S Disease and/or giving scholarships)."



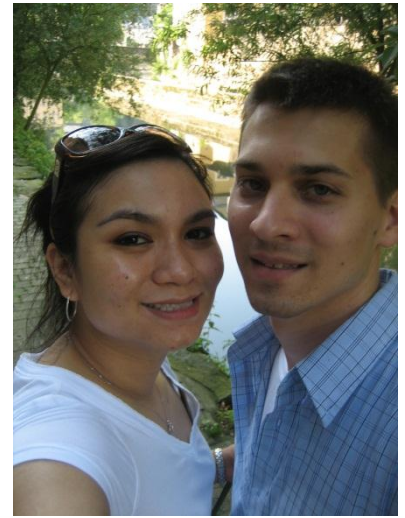
Sharon is a motivational speaker, ordained minister, aspiring author, and health enthusiast. She wrote and self-published, ***"STILL Jessica: Rising Above The Storm,"*** March of 2012. Sharon desires to bring awareness about STILL's Disease during her speaking engagements. She recently completed Peer Mentor training with the Tragedy Assistance program for survivors (TAPS).

"REMEMBER THE LOVE, CELEBRATE THE LIFE, SHARE THE JOURNEY"

Family Redefined

By Mary Ellen Winston, mother of Joseph Hamski

Joseph had come home on leave from Korea for his sister's wedding Thanksgiving weekend of 2008. He was spending a lot of time chatting online with a girl back at base. "I can't help it Mom, I just love her to pieces." By Christmas he was calling to say they were engaged and planning a trip to Seoul for New Year's. "They are going to get married," I told my husband. Shortly after the first of the year a phone call from Joseph confirmed that I was right. I had a new daughter-in-law. One early February evening the phone rang. "Mary Ellen, this is Christina." She was with her family on leave before heading to a new base in Germany.



My procrastinating son was still in Korea waiting for orders so he could accompany his wife to Germany. "Joe finally got his orders. I told him he needed to call you and tell you. But on thinking about it I just told him to give me your number and I would call. He would never get to it," came the voice on the other end. I fell in love with Christina with that first phone call. She knew him so well, and cared for him deeply.

Fast forward through a move to Germany, a deployment to Afghanistan for both of them, a formal wedding in Las Vegas, and a second deployment for Joseph again to Afghanistan, to the evening of May 26, 2011. I had read a strange post on Christina's Facebook page, "Everyone, please don't say anything until the time is right." I knew that she was working toward Tech Sergeant and thought, maybe she had heard something but it wasn't official yet. About 20 minutes later I found out the real reason when a team came to my door with the news of Joseph's death. After the initial shock, the first thing I remember thinking was, "Oh my God, poor Christina!" Through the funeral and memorials the next year we cried together, supported each other, and laughed together on remembering the crazy guy that had been my son and her husband.

Fast forward once again, this time to September, 2012. While chatting on Facebook with Christina she tells me that she has met a guy who is very open and accepting of her situation; that he understands that Joe will always be part of her life and doesn't make her feel awkward about it. "You deserve a good man in your life. I know that Joe would want good for you and you know that I want only the best for you. That kind of man is hard to find." On January 25 I got a text message with a picture of an engagement ring. "Look what I got!" the caption read.

My husband and I have just returned from a trip to visit Christina at her new home in Las Vegas and had the chance to meet the new man in her life. Once again she has found someone who cares for her very much and with whom she can be comfortable and happy. I will always miss my son, and know that she will always have a special place in her heart for him as well. But this woman that Joseph brought into our family has become special to me and I am so glad that she can move into the future in spite of the past. As she prepares to join a new family, it is my hope that we remain family as well. Family is connected not only by blood, but also by love. And I do love Christina.



My Story and a Challenge

By Linda Ambard, wife of Maj Phil Ambard

I want to share something and issue a challenge to you. You know that I truly understand and get the military family. We stand arm in arm, heart to heart together as one in times of loss. You are my family. Our ties are stronger than if we had been born of the same mother. You understand sending your soldier off away from home or you understand the duties that call you to miss so many family events. You understand home is a person and not a place. You understand not getting too attached to a job or place, but most of all you understand when that unspoken fear comes true.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think that my Phil was unsafe. After 26 years in the military and after his moving from being an NCO to an officer who largely worked in teaching, I wasn't afraid when he deployed. I was more fearful when early on he was a part of the drug wars and had to live on a compound. On 27 April 2011, my life changed forever. Every dream I had ended. I thought my life was over, but I am just discovering that while it is not the life I thought I was going to have, there is a purpose and a joy in speaking out for all of us.

Before Phil was killed, I was content to live in the shadows. I really didn't want to be noticed and I was content in my own little corner of the world. My time was my family or running. I cannot quench the blazing fire that compels me now, however. A fire stoked from the ashes of my life.

Most people think that they understand what happens when a service member is killed. People see the "official cars and notifications" on television, yet real life is sometimes a little more complicated. I found out at school after the media had figured out the professor that had been killed in action. My children found out on Facebook or through a phone call from a friend. Social media has changed this process, but imagine finding out this way.

I remember very little of the next 24 hours or the flight to Dover, DE. I remember sobbing uncontrollably on the airplane as people watched in horrid fascination. I remember pilots sending me notes to tell me that they stood with me. I remember USO people meeting me at the gate. I wasn't wearing any identifying apparel, but they found us and gave us drinks and snacks as they led us to the next gate. I remember that when I discovered that all of my ATM/credit cards which Phil had set up were locked (until I could get into the bank), but having the USO personnel in TX offer to buy my magazines, snacks, etc. While at the time, I do not know if I voiced appreciation, I have never forgotten. I honor the USO by donating 25% of my book's proceeds.

Walking off the plane in Dover, I was greeted by a woman who broke through my total brokenness. She picked me up the day that Phil came back to the US in a numbered black box and took me to run because she knew I would feel something. I cried so much, but I felt something. She talked to me about the Patriot Riders, men and women on motorcycles honoring our fallen.

I found those unbeatable military ties when I got to Dover because once there Phil's roommate from Afghanistan was there, a man he worked with at Hill AFB, and the man who took his place at USAFA were there to stand with my family. Standing together made me stronger and more cognizant that the loss was not just my loss. Phil's life mattered as did every person who didn't come home. Every name that flashes across our television screens wanted to come home. Every soldier that didn't come home had someone at home waiting for them, loving them, and wanting them to come home. Every one.

More from Linda...

All loss is hard, but it is made harder by the fact that the death is violent and in Phil's and the other 8 that died that day, unmentionable awful because it happened at the hands of someone that they trusted. In a room filled with soldiers that were co-mingled, only the Americans were killed. When the person you love comes home in a box and all of his things come home in a box, it is tempting to quit life.

Those that are stationed with their comrades that never come home come home with invisible scars. None are unscathed. We find strength by standing together and by holding each other through the joys and tears that follow. I know that I have been carried by the people living the military life. We all understand that there but for the grace of God could any of us be. I have seen the Patriot Riders shield families from the Westborough Baptist fanatics that seek to make a scene at military funerals. I have seen the USO volunteers be the connections that bind us all over the world. I have seen and experienced my military brothers and sisters standing with me every step of the way.

Now I challenge all of you to come and honor the military family by running the Dover Marathon on October 19th. Let us shout it to the world just what we are about. There will be a half marathon there, also. We are one. We stand together. The race benefits the Wounded Warriors and there will be links to my two charities, TAPS and the USO. TAPS is the tragedy assistance program that helps military families in our hardest hours because we are far from home, friends, and when the unthinkable accidents and tragedies happen, they support the families in many different ways. Without these organizations, my military family would be weaker. I urge you to come and stand with me and make a statement about who we are on 19 October 2013. The race director is offering a discount and he is going to help me set up a reception room because we are family.

Here is the information:

Registration website <http://www.piranha-sports.com/Race281.aspx>

2 discount codes are now set up and ready to go ~

Half Marathon \$10.00 promo code enter **USAFH13** (United States Armed Forces Half 2013)

Full Marathon \$15.00 promo code enter **USAFM13** (United States Armed Forces Marathon 2013)

Kent Buckson

Race Director

Monster Mash Marathon / Half Marathon

If you sign up, please e-mail me at ambardpl@hotmail.com or find me on Facebook at Linda Leonard Ambard because I would like to create a group to support each other with training and so that I can disseminate any information. We are one. You are my heart.

Race Information

Monster "Mash" Marathon

Dover, DE

Saturday October 19, 2013

Marathon Or Half Marathon. At Dover International Speedway next to "Miles the Monster"

Dover, DE

Benefiting the "Wounded Warrior Project"



My Angel & Team Jeremy

By Chief Chris Meyer



10 years ago I was on a short tour in Korea when I got a phone call from home saying my oldest son had been in a car accident and he was in serious condition. My First Sgt jumped through hoops and got me on a flight out on Incheon within 7 hours. 10 hours later when I stepped off the Korean Air flight at LAX an Air Force Major and Chaplain were waiting for me at the door of the aircraft to tell me my son had passed away when I was in the air making my way home. I still had to make it from California to Georgia where my family was living at the time and where my son had died. 12 hours later I finally made it home.

What I found out was my 17 year old son Jarett had been driving to a friend's house on a rainy evening when his car hydroplaned into some trees. He took a severe head blow and it was only a matter of about 10 hours that he gave into his injuries. He left behind me, his mother, little sister Sarah and little brother Jacob. As all of you know, I just did not know how I would ever be able to cope with his loss. The hole in my heart was so deep that I did not ever think it would be possible to fill it. As things would go, Jarett's mother and I separated and later divorced. A little while later though God sent me an angel and she help save my life.

My angels name is Jennifer. She could see that I had become a man with no direction

and that my passion for life had slipped away. She could see the hurt and the pain I was going through and she had the softest compassion for me, she had patience and caring and love without condition. In time Jennifer rescued me and through her I found life once again. Little did I know that she would one day be faced with the deepest of losses herself.

Jennifer also had two small children from a previous marriage, two boys and their names were Jeremy and Justen. When I first met them Jeremy was 12 and Justen 9. Jennifer trusted me and her and the boys accepted me into their lives. 3 years later we were married and on our way to Germany for a 2 year assignment that would be followed up by another 3 years in Italy.

When I look back I can remember so many good times we shared together. The boys involved in sports and we traveled everywhere with them. Jeremy being the oldest, his sports carried us around Europe. I have so many fond memories watching him perform on the mat as a DoDEA School wrestler. He was awesome, so precise so focused as he approached each match and Mom was always right there with him cheering and encouraging him. The year before he left Europe he was ranked #5 in Europe in the 135lb weight class.

Jeremy was also a phenomenal soccer player. He approached it just like he did wrestling with precision and skill and a lot of hard work and practice. He was never on a championship team but every time he stepped out on the field as a soccer player, football player, or wrestler he did so as a champion and always Mom was there cheering him on. I remember one time he told us that he could never hear anyone else in the stands but when Mom called his name he always heard her voice.

Those were such good times, yet also hard times as we watched a young man test the boundaries and begin to find himself and his place in life. We watched him build a lifelong friend, and we watched him fall in love for the

very first time with a beautiful girl named Sarah. And sadly, we watched him go back to the states to spend his senior year with his father in Nebraska. We never lost touch though.

Funny thing, Jeremy always told us that he would never join the military. When he graduated I have to tell you we were a bit worried about what he was going to do. He was working part time and taking some college classes but we knew that he really had not found his niche in life just yet. One day he called us while we were still stationed in Italy and told us he was joining the Air Force. We could not believe it! Several months later we found ourselves making that transatlantic flight to attend his graduation.

I was there, his dad was there, his brother, step-sister, grandma and grandpa, aunt and cousins, his first girlfriend but most important of all...his Mom was there. I saw so many proud mothers that day but none prouder the Jennifer and she became prouder and prouder over the next few days as we learned that Jeremy had found his true calling in life. He was an Airman. As we listened to him talk we could see the transformation that had taken place. My wife's little boy had become a leader. He was dorm chief, War hawk and honor graduate. When I heard other Airmen talk to him I could tell they viewed him as their leader. They would come up to him and say, Smithers, do you know what we are supposed to do about...He would answer with authority and respect. He was so confident, so focused.

A few months later after graduating from tech school he received his first assignment, RAF Lakenheath, England. We had about a month left on our assignment in Italy and so we caught a flight to England and spent Thanksgiving with Jeremy. It was during this time that we met the first two members of Team Jeremy, two young Airmen, a young man named Cary and a young lady named Sheri. Still yet to arrive on the scene would be Jeremy's best friend, the young man who would somberly accept the mission to escort Jeremy back to us a year and a half later.

On Memorial Day, May 28, 2012 I was sitting at home doing work on a paper for an online class when the doorbell rang. I ran down the stairs and through the glass I saw the 2 blue uniforms. I

I immediately knew...I just had to open the door to find out which child it was going to be. Our son-in-law an Air Force Staff Sergeant was traveling across country with our daughter to our house for our youngest son Justen's High School graduation and our other son Jacob was working in the oil fields. Justen was with me so I could account for him, and of course, there was Jeremy so far away in England.

When I opened the door and they asked for my angel Jennifer. I could not believe it, I could not wrap my mind around it, there was just too much to process. My mother and father in-law were also here for Justen's graduation. My Angel was not home and so we waited. So much ran through my head, I just could not believe that this could happen twice, that it could happen to the one who saved my life just 10 years ago. I just did not know what to do. When she came through the door she knew, her body could not hold herself up and she collapsed to the floor in anguish. After that so many things happened so slow and so fast over the coming weeks.

We waited two weeks for Jeremy to come home. We were all there at the Detroit airport when Jeremy finally arrived. Jennifer and I, Jeremy's father and his wife, Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, friends of Jeremy's from the different places in the world that we lived. His very first love was there as well as his wonderful British girlfriend who had flown in a few days earlier. We were all there standing on the tarmac with the Air Force Honor Guard as the Delta Airlines plane pulled into the gate.

First off the plane in his service dress uniform was Airman First Class Jeremy Flores. It was here that we would meet the final member of Team Jeremy. He climbed up into the belly of the aircraft and prepared the casket. He carefully positioned the American flag and then came back down on the luggage carrier. He then stood at attention, raised his right hand in salute as Jeremy came out of the plane. I could hear hearts breaking all around me as we all gathered but none louder than Jennifer's, our beloved Jeremy. As I looked around I saw Amn Flores standing off to the side by himself looking at Jeremy's mom. A few moments later he came to

her and put his arms around her and just held her as she buried her face into his uniform and sobbed. I could see his face and the anguish in his eyes as he held his best friend's mother in his arms.

We took Jeremy back home to his mother and father's little home town of 950 located on the thumb of Michigan. It was the perfect place as Jeremy had spent so many fond days there in his life with his grandpa and grandma, aunts, uncles, cousins and friend's.

The next day as we began to prepare things people started arriving from all over the world. There was his first girlfriend from Germany and her mom, who had flown in from Texas. Our Chaplain from Italy flew in. His step brother and sister Sarah and Jacob came from Oklahoma. There was Jack, a friend of Jeremy's who was on leave from England when Jeremy was lost, he drove over from an Eastern state that I can't remember the name of now. There was Joe, his best friend in High School in Germany who had come in from Colorado. Of course Amn Flores was there and so was Jeremy's girlfriend Vikki. Jeremy's step brother and sister were also there. But most amazingly Jeremy's commander came and with her she brought Cary and Shari. Members of Team Jeremy were all assembled.

Over the next few days we all became a family. It did not matter how someone knew Jeremy, or if it was me and Jeremy's father or Jennifer and Jeremy's step-mother it just did not matter. Jeremy was the one thing we all had in common. I loved to watch his friends as they interacted. It was amazing to see the Team Jeremy friends from the Air Force interact with Jeremy's friends that he grew up with from different parts of the world and with other members of the family. It was amazing to see the two different families, his fathers and his mothers come together and blend over the coming days.

Jeremy was 22 and he was beautiful and everyone that came in contact with him left a little bit better of a person. I know this ability came from his mother. Just like her, Jeremy had a way of saving people. It did not matter what station in life they held, he was going to find

something in common with you and make you feel important. I can still picture the conversation he had with different individuals and how he looked so earnest as he listened to them. He was such a fine young man.

God gave us one last wonderful conversation with Jeremy just about 18 hours before we lost him. We were all at home, Jennifer and I, Jeremy's grandparents and Justen. It was a Sunday Afternoon when the Skype started ringing in on my wife's computer. We answered it and it was Jeremy!

He had just spent a glorious first good day of spring with his Team Jeremy friends and a few others on the beach in England. He was tired but he wanted to chat with us. For about an hour we all talked with him, the entire family. He told us about his day and we laughed at his stories. He finally got off Skype because it was late there in Lakenheath and he was going to the American Cemetery in England the next morning to participate in the Memorial Day events. We all told him we loved him, he told us the same and we said our goodbyes.

Little did we know that the next morning as we were waking he would be returning home on his motorcycle to his barracks when his life would so tragically be brought to an end by a careless truck driver.

As I write this it has been 10 months. We are fast approaching our first Memorial Day and even harder our first "Angelsversary." But hardest of all, my beautiful wife's first Mothers Day without Jeremy. It has not been easy as I know it is not easy for so many others that have experienced the deep empty feeling of the loss of a child. There are still many, many days that I know Jennifer still battles through the anguish in her sole at the loss of her first born son. I hear her silently crying in the early mornings as she lies next to me in bed. I see her gaze linger on his picture as she passes it along the stairs. I also see how amazing and resilient this woman is. I am astounded as I watch her gather herself together and pick herself up and then, she helps others.

Just 2 weeks after we lost Jeremy a member of my unit was also killed in a motorcycle accident and he too left behind a spouse and mother.

Jennifer immediately reached out to her. Not long later I saw as she reached out again to another spouse that had suffered the loss from a suicide. She is the Key Spouse for my squadron of 400 and she is there for all of them no matter what. Just this past weekend she organized an Easter Party and egg hunt for the families of my unit. Next week I know there will be something else. She never gave up.

God selected my Angel to be the mother of a fine young man. He was a compassionate giver just like her and a leader just like her. She is the one who taught him how to lead where people would flock to him because of his caring and compassion and drive. She is the Mother of the leader of Team Jeremy...

You know as Mothers Day approaches and I think about this, I am not so sure this is an uncommon action for a woman who has lost a child. I think when God made Mothers starting with Eve, the first Mother to lose a son; he knew as the rest of us falter in these desperate situations he created a Mother to be extra strong, to be the glue that holds humanity together... For this reason I thank all of the mothers that have lost a child for their beautiful grace in the midst of such a painful time and I wish them a Mother's Days of fond memories just as I will be wishing my beautiful Jennifer the same for the first time without Jeremy in our lives.



Chief William "Chris" Meyer has served in the US Air Force for 29 years. Currently stationed at Malmstrom AFB, Chief Meyer will be retiring from the Civil Engineering career field in 2014.





Air Force Families Forever

Robin L. Raine, Program Manager



302-677-2328

Mailing Address:

**c/o Families of the Fallen Support Branch
116 Purple Heart Drive
Dover AFB, DE 19902**

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